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Histoires pragmatiques

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Bruno Settis



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REFERENCES

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- 1 1. Can “practice” and “practices” be used as epistemological tools to study history? Can these concepts be used to break up unilateral and teleological narratives on the one hand, and, on the other, to provide a basis for a new understanding and writing of history and histories? The twelve essays (by thirteen authors) collected by Francis Chateauraynaud and Yves Cohen under the title *Histoires Pragmatiques* (in the EHESS's *Raisons pratiques. Epistémologie, sociologie, théorie sociale* series) are bound together by such a research hypothesis, as well as by the scientific pluralism it entails.
- 2 This review is divided into two main parts. The first gives an account of the content of the book, stressing the affinities between the various essays, as the editors' coordination and introduction also do. In the second part, starting from the divergences between the same essays, I will try to point out what I think are the main ambiguities and the limits of the pragmatic approach (or approaches). Reference to further literature will be kept to a minimum.
- 3 2. The intention to discuss ambiguities and limits is, of course, shared by the editors, who open the book with the harsh controversy – a genuine *Pratiquesstreit* – between Angelo Torre and Roger Chartier, which appeared in the Italian journal “Quaderni Storici” in 1995-96.¹

- 4 By retracing the theoretical steps of António Manuel Hespanha (focusing on his history of political institutions) and Chartier (comparing the latter's to Bourdieu's, in which he identified its true matrix), Torre criticized the "practice paradigm" ("paradigma della pratica") which dominated the 1980s. He emphasized that its theoretical framework "suffers from having been developed as a tool in an ideological debate, in the context of the reaction against transactionalism and interactionism," looking for a way to avoid the symmetric dangers of positivism and individualism. According to Torre, a possible definition of *practices* lies in the fact that "the validity of practices lies in their being actions acknowledged as legitimate because of their special relation with legitimation devices in a certain context (situation)"; thereby, "reading actions in terms of legitimation allows [us] to see *how rules are created through action*" (820-1). Chartier, for his part, claims that his own work was a defense against the linguistic turn, rather than a capitulation to it, inasmuch as it maintained – through a thorough reading of sources and awareness of their social context and epistemological limits – "the irreducible difference between the practices shaping social relations, and those presiding over the production of discourse."
- 5 The editors found it useful to recover this twenty year-old dialogue, inasmuch as it brings many unresolved issues explicitly (and harshly) to a head. At that point, on the one hand, the depth of the crisis of the classical historiographical paradigms had been fully revealed; on the other, the proposed innovations and turns coming from philosophy and linguistics had displayed many of their limits and fallen short of most of their proclamations. The main targets of these innovations and turns were notions such as *structure* and, most of all, of *process*: notions which, I will argue in the latter part of this review, are still to be considered vital to the work of the historian. In recalling that controversy, the aim of the editors may be to suggest that, twenty years on, the time has come to accept the all-encompassing potential of a notion such as *practice*, with its ability to surpass its anti-structuralist origin and to overcome objections such as that of Torre. The question is whether, behind the diversity of *practices* (in the plural), we can detect an idea of *practice* that is as flexible as it is shared, and whether it provides the main thread for this volume. In my opinion, the notions of *practice/practices* appearing in the essays overlap only in part.
- 6 The essays share the aim of studying documents in their collective dimension, highlighting their production as a collective process involving different social actors and, most importantly, as a framework for ideas of legitimacy. Documents, therefore, are seen neither as a creation of a single individual (Ernest Mattern, in Yves Cohen's essay, is taken as a representative of a generation of Taylorist engineers) nor as a fragment of social totality (Fanny Gallot's *filles d'usines* are not a mere slice of the industrial working class, but a group struggling to gain a new representation and reputation). Rather, they are the products of the practice of groups (social, professional, communities, etc.), in their dialectical relationship with norms. Sociology would speak of a *meso* level between the *micro* and the *macro*.
- 7 Documents may convey the will of authoritarian organization and social control, as in the case of Cohen's social engineers, Mattern and Stalin. More often, they bear the stamps and scars of long processes of negotiation: inside institutions and between the institutions and the State (as in Grégory Dufaud's essay on Soviet psychiatric institutes in the 1920s and 1930, which starts from the accidents and arrives at the public debate that influenced the Council of People's Commissars' decisions in 1936); between

different social actors confronting each other in the arena of politics and public opinion (Chateauraynaud shows how asbestos and GMOs are made into health issues and political issues); between different subjects inside a community, cooperating but holding different demands (Marie Bouhaïk-Gironès analyzes the manuscripts and the accountants' books, revealing the procedure of compromise and adjustments, in which ideas of legitimacy and book-keeping concerns are meddled with); between the project and its realization (Frédéric Graber outlines a "pragmatic history of *formes projet*," an anthropological and sociological reading of which, following Boltanski, may point out a true apologetics of capitalism); between different contexts, building a bridge between which may be the task of a specific, professionalized group (such as Stéphane Péquignot's case study, through documents coming from the Arxiu Històric de la Ciutat de Barcelona, of the hard work of the Aragonese, French, and Castilian ambassadors to bring the parties involved to an agreement on the heir to the throne of Aragon, following the death of Martin I in 1410).

- 8 The relationship between practice and theory is perhaps the most sensitive point. Cohen even admits that it is easier to define practice by negation, that is, by opposition, in the first instance, to the history of ideas; as soon as a positive definition is attempted, however, it must integrate "the way in which actors, in each of the examined practices, conceive what practice is. [...] In fact, in these practices, in the very movement of their development, debates on practice take place, between practitioners" (109). No practice without theory of practice, therefore. We are dealing with a "pragmatism which does not specifically deal with American pragmatist philosophy" (111): it looks like Taylorist engineers and managers, like Monsieur Jourdain, were pragmatists without knowing it (and one might ask, therefore, to what extent philosophical pragmatism was the ideological projection of the organizational drive and managerial revolution of early 20th Century America). In this essay (as in Tullio Viola and Roberto Gronda's interview in the present issue) Cohen resumes the bulk of his life-spanning research: the legitimation of practices of social control through efficiency and science is the fundamental characteristic of the "siècle des chefs," the "century of leaders" dominated by Stalin and Ford, the Bolsheviks and the Managers.
- 9 In the essay written by Béatrice Delaurenti we see an example of the building of a theory of action, through the debate on the possibilities of action at a distance in the Middle Ages (13th-14th Centuries), involving medicine, philosophy, and theology, going from Aristotle to Richard of Middleton (but, once again, documents are to be studied as a collective production: we have access to some of the students' notes). Such a debate can be seen, according to Delaurenti, as "a step in men's reflection on their own possibilities of action, and also an event provoking a rupture in intelligibility"; a rupture in which the "double function of medieval discourse, at the same time creative and normalizing" (171-2), can flourish.
- 10 The final point of this reflection on the relationship between theory and practice is the essay on *re-enactment* as a possible tool for pragmatic history, in which Rémy Campos and Nicolas Donin classify different ways of *putting sources into practice* – with examples ranging from Leroi-Gourhan's experimental archaeology to the reactivation of the memory of the actors themselves, as director Pierre Huyghe did with bank robber John Wojtowicz in the documentary *The Third Memory* (1999). Cohen too, as he explains in the interview, has been studying how the factory works as a worker: "Back then I was

Maoist. I was a worker, I was engaged in politics, and I reflected on the same experiences as a historian.”

- 11 Roberto Frega’s is the most theoretical essay in this collection, and also the most theoretically consistent, addressing the plurality of all the possible and sometimes contrasting meanings of a pragmatic history. The latter can be meant in both a methodological and an ontological sense (more precisely, a “functional ontology,” 337): starting from this distinction, Frega reaches an elastic notion of practice as “a key concept insofar as it allows to show the articulation of this heterogeneous material; in this sense, it is necessary to understand that science is neither knowledge, nor conflict, nor technology, but rather the complex arrangement of all such factors” (336). This notion comes from the realm of science but may be fruitfully applied to others, such as social history: Frega’s favorite reference is to Charles Tilly’s contentious repertoires, clearly situated on a *meso* level of collective action and legitimation. “Neither a history of individual conducts, nor history of social totalities: pragmatic history shall find its balance in this intermediary ontological dimension of practices” (344).
- 12 What is perhaps the most interesting and fertile feature of pragmatist historiography is, in fact, its ability to “liven up” sources by combining a thorough internal analysis with an enquiry into the social and cultural conditions of their production (and also their reading, as Chartier has shown us). We can take for example Bouhaïk-Gironès’s essay, dedicated to “writing in action” (*l’écriture en action*) – namely, the writing processes of a *Mystère de saint Sebastien*, Chalon-sur-Saône, Saône-et-Loire, 1497, and a *Mystère des trois Doms*, Romans, Drôme, 1509, commissioned by the communes. The “mise en texte” is the preparatory stage of a “mise en scène.” The manuscript of the *Mystère de saint Sebastien*, for instance, “shows different interventions in the text, though a system of signs in the margins (sharps, crosses, capital letters, etc.); simple corrections of verses, changes of characters in some performances (especially involving the devil), deletion or expansion of some roles, [...] addition of some episodes and, finally, instructions in Latin on scenography, representation, pauses, and musical moments (the so-called *silète*)” (93); it goes without saying that, from this perspective, “the historian will find what is most revealing in the document not in the information that its author wanted but, rather, in what he deleted, in the signs bearing witness of the errors or hesitations of actors, notaries, and parties” (99). In this essay, in conclusion, the case studies are intertwined with reflections on how to detect the vivid traces of practice in historical sources.
- 13 3. The common goal of putting practices at the center of their enquiries, while building their framework with norms, shall not let the divergences between the essays be overlooked.
- 14 The most striking concerns perhaps the manifold spectrum of attitudes towards the documents. On the one hand, we find once again the notion that some special method could make historical sources “speak for themselves” (it is here repeated by Graber and Dufaud); on the other hand, there is in Campos and Donin’s essay an “overflowing” of the historian’s own work, which is supposed to produce, through re-enactment and the other reproduction techniques, new sources and new archives (279).
- 15 Different practices go together, needless to say, with different theories. The different backgrounds of the authors are reflected in the different genealogies that they propose for the pragmatic approach, the two drawn by Torre and Frega being the most articulate. While the former is explicitly polemic, the latter appreciates the

heterogeneity of the cultural streams converging in the *pratiques* approach, starting with Wittgenstein and going beyond Bourdieu. While Dufaud emphasizes the centrality of William James, Cohen, for his part, through Bernard Lepetit, traces it all back to Kantian anthropology (which was written “from a Pragmatic Point of View”). In their introduction, Chateauraynaud and Cohen go as far as Polybius. While such a heterogeneity may be a strong point insofar as it concurs in its elasticity, enabling it to encompass many different shades in the relation between practices and norms, it is arguable that it may also reveal deeper weaknesses and as yet unresolved issues.

- 16 The difficulty of combining philosophical perspectives as different as Wittgenstein’s, Foucault’s, and the American pragmatists’, is perhaps underestimated, making such a combination look more straightforward and harmonious than it could be: one needs only to think of the different notions and functions of *power* in these philosophers. Furthermore, in the effort of tracing its titles of nobility back to the classics in the writing of history (such as Marc Bloch and Carlo Ginzburg and microhistory in the editors’ introduction, and Bouhaïk-Gironès’s essay, or the reference to moral economy, in Graber’s), the deep bond these had with economic context and technical conditions is often overlooked.
- 17 If we are to take seriously the purpose of considering meaningful what has been omitted, we should underline the outright absence, in this syncretism, of Karl Marx, and to ask if a specific reason for this absence can be identified. Marx in fact appears only in Cohen’s essay, and even there, in the background (121 and 124). Still, one might argue that a pragmatist approach could fruitfully draw on historical materialism’s stress on human practice and on its ability to shape theory and culture (compare *Theses on Feuerbach*, VIII: “All social life is essentially practical”). The answer is probably that Marxian stress on social totality (human essence as “the ensemble of social relations,” *Theses on Feuerbach*, VI) is not compatible with pragmatism, which tends to see it as mere determinism and to focus on the level of intentionality. I will try to come back to these problems in the latter part of the review.
- 18 What is certain is that, if one wishes to understand the position of the *pratiques* approach to history in the history of methodologies and, broadly speaking, in the history of culture (an understanding which probably goes together with weighing its potentialities and obscurities), it is necessary to go beyond the pragmatist historian’s own self representation and internal debate.
- 19 In his introduction to an Italian collection of Chartier’s essays, Carlo Ginzburg set a positivist approach to sources, according to which any document could be used as a “clear and direct testimony of social reality,” against “a radically different, and more sophisticated, path, according to which each source can bear witness only to itself and, therefore, the only reality the historian can have access to is that of representation. It is a radically idealistic view, which, taken to the extreme, would prevent different archival series from being integrated and would block, therefore, the very possibility of historical research.”² Chartier’s was a “third way” between the two, inasmuch as he aimed at discovering the bond between reality and representation precisely through the inversions and silences in the representations themselves – in the case, at least, of marginalities, namely the *cours des miracles*’ beggars in the 16th and 17th centuries.
- 20 By bringing it all back to a contrast between a positivistic and an idealistic approach to sources, Ginzburg highlights that the fundamental traditions in the history of culture are always in action. Therefore, its fundamental issues are always at stake, no matter

how radical innovations and ruptures are supposed to be. The combination of history and pragmatism is no exception: in the first place, because of its explicit syncretic nature; and in the second place, because of the absolute priority it confers to the subjectivity of actors, whose action and agency are structurally founded on their worldviews (which also means that conflicting actions are in the end founded on a conflict between norms and worldviews, as is the case with the conflict between the Taylorist Mattern and the workers).

- 21 What the *pratiques* approach seems to lack is precisely the desire to understand what is going on *beyond* the conscience of the historical actors, *while shaping it*. In this regard, once again, the classics in historiography have not finished saying what they have to say. Since *pratiques* had been conceived in opposition to *structures*, namely, as a device to unlock the often suffocating determinism of the latter (this, as I have already recalled, seems to be the main thread of the present book), they often ended up forgoing a broad range of questions about the logic of historical changes – questions that fall under the concept of *process*.
- 22 What could appear at first sight as mere reverting to the old controversy between structures and processes might, on the contrary, be a step forward, if one thinks of the definition given by Ellen Meiksins Wood of Edward P. Thompson's research: *structured processes*, "in which relations of production exert their pressures by transforming inherited realities."³ Thompson focused on the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions in England as deep social traumas. It is no small achievement, and accounts in part for the fact that his essays on English social history in the 18th and 19th centuries are now essential references about the making of the working classes in many different contexts around the world (this applies in particular to his book on the *Making of the English Working Class*, notwithstanding the fact that Thompson here deals with a subject located at the very heart of Europe, i.e., the industrial revolution and its role in the genesis of European political cultures).
- 23 Recalling E. P. Thompson allows us point to out what the *pratiques* approach seems to be losing in its evolution from tool to paradigm: the ability to grasp the connection between human collective action and cultures and the processes which inform consciousness even when they evade it. By focusing on the supposed *meso* level of practices, the connection between the *micro* and the *macro* falls out of the spotlight; it is the latter, obviously, which is most feared and explicitly rejected (for both practical and theoretical reasons, see Frega's essay).
- 24 While "thinking through consequences" ["*penser par conséquences*"] hardly looks like an original and revealing perspective, historians cannot allow unthought of consequences to fall out of sight – consequences which are not apparent to the conscience of the actors themselves. There is a broad range of phenomena which it is not possible to understand (or even to grasp) merely by considering them as the result, or net force, of the different ends, means and practices of different social actors and groups. To take but one, general example: in the rise and evolution of capitalism, both at the core and the peripheries of its expansion, new market and labor relations were subsumed under the capitalist mode of production by the combination of direct coercive force and the impersonal agencies of accumulation, of the labor process itself and its technical exigencies, of the developments of commerce and finance, and so on. The expansion, generalization and differentiation of capitalism was a process imposing itself "in the shape of external coercive laws" (Marx), which often engaged in a violent

struggle with pre-existing norms and practices. What E.P. Thompson called “the experience of determination” unifies the *micro*, *meso* and *macro* levels (and in this experience we can see the materiality of structures of which Cohen speaks in Viola and Gronda’s interview). This seeming externality is a level of objectivity which must itself be understood in its historical scope.

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NOTES

1. Torre 1995 and Roger Chartier 1996. It is worth noting that the following issue of “Quaderni Storici” (93 / a. xxxi, n. 3, December 1996) was dedicated to *Erudizione e fonti. Storiografie della rivendicazione* and Torre was the editor, together with Enrico Artifoni. In their introduction they wrote, clearly referring to the “pratiques approach” and to Chartier in particular (and clearly subsuming pragmatism under the label of skepticism, because of its opening the doors to subjectivism): “New forms of skepticism shifted the historian’s attention from the source itself to reading devices and to the argumentation and demonstration. There is a risk that the nature of evidence, its uncertainty and stickiness are used to legitimize an endless proliferation of interpretations, each inasmuch as the subjective perception becomes the foundation of the attribution of meaning” (511). Cf. Bizzocchi 1996.
2. Ginzburg (1984: 8).
3. Meiksins Wood (2016: 71, and 79).

AUTHORS

BRUNO SETTIS

Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa / Centre d'histoire de Sciences Po, Paris

bruno.settis[at]sns.it